

A GOD OF RELIGIONS?

Religions and the Religious

Readers will have noticed that the author occasionally refers to *the religions*, but in some contexts does not apply this term ‘religion’ to Christianity. Yet the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines religion as: *the belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship*, thereby implying that Christianity is a religion. Few would argue with that definition at one level, but the ‘true religion’ revealed in the Bible differs in basic respects from all the other religions in the world, and must therefore be accorded a different categorial status. The key features which mark out authentic Christian faith have to do with the distinctive relationship between God and the believer, marked by faith, love and obedience. In Deuteronomy 6:4–9 we read the Jewish *shema*: **Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.**

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The command is to love. And that command is to be written upon a person's heart. God looks for *relationship* founded on love, and the love that God demands is total love. The author recognizes that some readers will have difficulty with this concept, especially if they have no real experience of God and have never met pure self-giving love. These readers are encouraged to 'hang on in there' whilst we explore a little more of this God Who gives love and demands love. If we were to love God in the way He demands, by giving Him our first allegiance and our best in everything, then surprisingly our love for our fellow humans, whether 'brothers' or 'neighbours' (there is a biblical distinction¹) will grow and express itself in ways that will amaze us!

The *shema* love that we are to experience as we worship God is to be so absorbing that we can hardly help ourselves from impressing that same love onto our children, and gossiping about it, and thinking about it regularly as we go about our daily business. The truly pious Hebrews of the Old Testament period did indeed tie God's commandments onto their wrists, and head-dress, and on the door posts of their houses. Symbolically today a Christian (and indeed an observant Jew) would expect to 'wear' the commands of God around their mind so that these commands are foundational to all they think and do. Christians would add that it is through the Holy Spirit that these commands become real to us; we are baptised in the same Holy Spirit and we are to go on being filled with Him.

Jesus affirmed the Jewish *shema* as He spoke about the greatest commandment: **One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"**

¹ See Appendix 3.

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mark 12:28–34).

We note straight away that true love for God leads to true love for neighbour. The command here is not so much to love our brother or sister (although Jesus elsewhere makes special provision for this),² the command is to love all people everywhere and recognize in them the potential for that same love of God (whether or not they presently acknowledge Him). In loving our neighbours as ourselves, we will do them no mischievous harm. Instead we will live peaceably among all men, so far as it depends on us (other men may choose not to treat us peaceably). **“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”** (Romans 12:18, NKJV).

Is the author of this book trying to make an artificial distinction between *the religions* and Christianity? As already noted, most would agree that Christianity matches that basic dictionary definition. But, at a deeper level, the author contends that there is a world of difference between *the religions* and true Christianity. *The religions*, in essence,

² See Appendix 3.

teach how humans reach up to a god or gods; Christianity teaches about a God Who reaches down to humanity. *The religions* teach about earning god's favour and so earning a right to some sort of paradise experience. Christianity teaches about a gift of life, given by God to penitent sinners — an amazing gift of grace given freely to human creatures who, in the final analysis, do not deserve it.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Christians were first called *the people of The Way*. And what is this 'Way'? We revert to the words of the Lord Jesus in John 3:14: **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”** The Way is Jesus. The believing of which Jesus spoke is clearly much more than a simple mental assent or acknowledgement. It is a believing that transforms and a believing that acts, so the believer becomes an entirely new creation; as it continues: **“whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** (v. 16). The relationship of believer to God becomes one of parent and adopted (born again) child: **“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.”** (John 1:12–13) This new birth leads us to a new life here in this world as we seek to become more like Jesus, our Lord and our Saviour: **“How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. Everyone who has this hope in him purifies**

himself, just as [Jesus] is pure” (1 John 3:1–3). With this new life comes a new assurance before God, so the apostle John continues: **Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world? Only he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.**

Becoming a disciple of Jesus leads to a completely new identity in Christ. There seem to be three key categories of identity in Christianity as suggested by the following short study, which readers may want to follow through as a separate exercise. These categories of identity are *acceptance* by God, *security* in God and *significance* in God. A true believer then can confidently claim:

I am accepted

I am God’s child — John 1:12

I am Christ’s friend — John 15:15

I have been justified — Romans 5:1

I am united with the Lord, and one in spirit with Him —
1 Corinthians 6:17

I have been bought with a price and belong to God —
1 Corinthians 6:19–20

I am a saint — Ephesians 1:1

I have been adopted as God’s child — Ephesians 1:5

I have direct access to God through the Holy Spirit —
Ephesians 2:18

I have been redeemed and all my sins forgiven — Colossians
1:14

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I am complete in Christ — Colossians 2:10

I am secure

I am free forever from condemnation — Romans 8:1–2

I am assured that all things work together for good —
Romans 8:28

I am free from any condemning charges against me —
Romans 8:31

I cannot be separated from the love of God — Romans
8:35

I have been established, anointed and sealed by God —
2 Corinthians 1:21–22

I am hidden with Christ in God — Colossians 3:3

I am confident the good work that God has begun in me
will be perfected — Philippians 3:6

I am a citizen of heaven — Philippians 3:20

I have not been given a spirit of fear but of power, love and
self control — 2 Timothy 1:7

I can find grace and mercy in time of need — Hebrews
4:16

I am born of God, and the evil one cannot harm me —
1 John 5: 18

I am significant

I am the salt and light of the earth — Matthew 5:13–14

I am a branch of the true vine, a channel of his life — John
15:1,5

I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit — John
15:16

I am a personal witness of Christ — Acts 1:8

I am God's temple — 1 Corinthians 3:16

I am a minister of reconciliation for God — 2 Corinthians
5:17ff

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I am God's co-worker — 1 Corinthians 3:9 and 2 Corinthians 6:1

I am seated with Christ in the heavenly realm – Ephesians 2:6

I am God's workmanship — Ephesians 2:10

I may approach God with freedom and confidence — Ephesians 3:12

I can do all things through Christ Who strengthens me – Philippians 4–13

Readers will see that these are pretty amazing claims to make. Christianity is not so much a religion as a relationship; the relationship of a child to their loving and holy Father through Jesus Christ, the Father's Son. Christianity is not so much *distinct* from *the religions* as *a world apart* from any other religion, and that is why this writer asserts that true Christianity is not a religion at all. It is therefore much more appropriate to speak of *The Way* as compared to *the religions* and that is why in this book we have generally made a distinction by referring to other faith systems as *the religions*. It is a subtle but real distinction we have made. Readers may want to adopt this distinction in their own thinking as it helps us to see the 'clear blue water' between true Christianity and other belief systems. In thinking of the categories of identity we looked at above (acceptance, security and significance) the challenge, as always, reverts to the Godist to explain how *the religions* provide equivalent overpowering assurance to their respective followers.

If God has graciously given Christians these amazing promises and assurances, then what is provided in the so-called 'higher' religions? And how dependable are any such assurances that these religions *are* able to give to their followers? A Christian knows that Christ died an

appalling death for them personally, and for love of His Father. A Christian knows that Jesus rose from death to conquer death, and that this was always God's ultimate plan. A Christian knows that Jesus Christ intercedes before the Father for them still (Romans 8:34). As God has lavished these assurances—these *golden promises* — to those who follow Jesus, just what has He done for the other 'paths' that are supposed to lead to Him?

Whilst writing this book the author's attention was drawn to the testimony of an Indian lady in the nineteenth century who was brought up as a pious Hindu but later came to faith in Christ. She was of the Shudra caste (one of the higher castes) and her father taught his children *the way of Moksha*.³ Moksha is considered to be liberation from the everlasting trouble of reincarnation 'in millions and millions of animal species, and undergoing the pains of suffering of countless millions of diseases and deaths'. Her father lived the life of an itinerant guru, travelling from one sacred place to another, staying in each place for several months, bathing in a sacred river or tank, visiting temples, worshipping household gods and the images of gods in the temples, and reading Puranas in temples and other convenient places.

For the lady's father, the reading of Puranas served a double purpose. The first and foremost was that of 'getting rid of sin' and of earning merit in order to obtain Moksha, and the other to earn a living without resorting to begging. The readers of Puranas ('Puranikas') are popular public preachers among the Hindus. They sit in some prominent place, in temple halls or under trees with their manuscript books in their hands, and read the Puranas in a loud voice. The text, being in the Sanskrit language, may well not be understood by the hearers and the Purikanas are not obliged

³ Notable that Moksha should be considered as 'the way' in the light of our earlier thoughts on this subject

to explain it to them. *'They may or may not explain it as they choose. Sometimes . . . the Purikana takes great pains to make his speech as popular as he can, by telling greatly exaggerated or untrue stories. This is not considered sin, since it is done to attract the common peoples' attention.'* After a reading, the pious among the Hindus would prostrate themselves before the Purikana and offer flowers, sweetmeats, garments, money, and other things. *'The offeror knows that his store of merit will be according to what he gives, and he tries to be as generous as he can.'* The Hindu lady engaged in deeper studies after the death of her father. She affirmed: *'While reading the Dharma Shastras I came to know many things which I never knew before. There were contradictory statements about almost everything. What one book said to be righteous, another declared to be unrighteous. While reading the Mahabharata I found the following. "The Vedas differ from each other; Smrities, that is books of sacred laws, do not agree with one another; the secret of religion is in some hidden place: the only way is that which is followed by great men."'*

Most unsettling of all, the lady discovered that the position of women whether of high or low caste was appalling: *'They could not get Moksha as men. The only hope of their getting this much desired liberation from Karma and its results, that is countless millions of births and deaths and untold suffering, was the worship of their husbands. The husband is said to be the woman's god; there is no other god for her. This god may be the worst sinner or a great criminal; still he is her god and she must worship him. She can have no hope of getting admission into Svarga, the abode of the gods without his pleasure, and if she pleases him in all things, she will have the privilege of going to Svarga as his slave, there to serve him and be one of his wives among the thousands*

of Svarga harlots who are presented to him by the gods in exchange for his wife's merit.' The testimony continues: *'The woman is allowed to go into the higher existence thus far but to attain Moksha or liberation, she must perform such great religious acts as will obtain for her the merit by which she will be reincarnated as a high caste man the extraordinary religious acts which help a woman get into the way of getting Moksha are utter abandonment of her will to that of her husband. She is to worship him with whole-hearted devotion as the only god; to know no other pleasure in life except in the most degraded slavery to him.'* The testimony goes on to note that the lot of the Hindu men is not much better, especially if they are of low caste.

Once again the challenge reverts to the Godist: why does their 'god' reveal 'himself' or 'itself' in such sublime purity and offer such sublime assurance to the follower of Jesus, as we saw above, but gives no *equivalent* assurance within the so-called higher religions. Lack of time prevents us from looking at the other religions, but the same verdict is broadly applicable. And the same question must be answered by the Godists as they seek to defend those other belief systems: why does their 'god' treat people so differently? And to a specifically church-based Godist, how does this treatment square with a God who is good (chapter 6) and holy (chapter 7)? As we shall see later, there are today some church based Godists who say that 'god' is both good and bad at the same time!

We will leave our testimony from India with this interesting postscript: in the mid nineteenth century a new form of Hinduism emerged in India, called Brahmoism. A reader can quickly Google a description of the religion if they are so inclined. The female witness we have followed simultaneously looked into Brahmoism as she explored

Christianity. She wrote this: *'The Brahma religion was not a very definite one, for it is nothing but what a man makes for himself. He chooses and gathers whatever seems good to him from all the religions known to him, and prepares a sort of religion for his own use. The Brahma religion has no other foundation than man's own natural light and the sense of right and wrong which he possesses in common with all mankind.'* This, surely, is a very apposite description of Godism!

Are atheistic political ideologies such as communism religions? Thinking 'outside the box' a little, our definition of 'religion' may go wider. We noted earlier the definition of true Christianity as a *relationship rather than a religion* — a relationship like that of a child to his parent; a relationship of trust and total dependence by those who acknowledge their need and acknowledge their dependence on a completely righteous and completely holy God; a relationship with God who loves His adopted children, in spite of their unworthiness, with the tender love of a parent to his child. Some have defined religion rather more widely as *any systemised belief in 'god' where 'god' may be a supernatural deity, or may be mankind himself*. All such belief systems involve a measure of collaboration with their 'god' in 'earning' his respect and his reward. This way of viewing religions suggests that they all have human founders, have their special writings and believe in the utter rightness of their particular 'revelation'. By this definition we can easily include communism, fascism and even fundamentalist evolutionism. All religions share the foundation stone — or *cornerstone* if you prefer — of making man the measure of all. Of making man into 'god' or a sort of co-god alongside the deity. So we think of Adolf Hitler and *Mein Kampf*, of

Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*, and even Charles Dawin and his *On The Origin of Species*. Few would bracket Charles Darwin with Hitler and Marx, but evolutionism at its most fundamental also sees man as the measure of all — not created man, but evolved man. It must then be noteworthy that each of these — communism, fascism and evolutionism, alongside the other more obvious religions — persecute those who follow Jesus solely as Lord and as Saviour. This world, it has been wisely observed, is not anti god. This world is anti *Christ*. We have religions and belief systems literally everywhere, but they all preach something radically different to the *righteousness of God*, who shouldered our guilt as Jesus died on the cross at Calvary.

Looking at just one of these belief systems, we quote from H.G. Wells, the British writer and essayist who is best known for his science fiction writings such as *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine*. Wells was an outspoken socialist, but one who had no time for communism. He wrote this in chapter 15 of his massive 1936 tome *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* — a sort of hymn to a socialist utopia:

Perhaps the most vital contemporary religion is embodied in the disciplines of the communist party.... The Communist prides himself upon his implacable materialism. He is resolved not to fall away from the intense practicality which all other religions have so conspicuously lost

The sense of the danger of ‘weakening off’ haunts the Communist and produces, just as it produced in other religions, a heavy stressing on orthodoxy. The [Communist] religion is fighting hard for great ends, and there is a heavy strategic disadvantage in any modifications of doctrine.

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Communism clings to orthodoxy, the true and only faith, and already there have been heresy hunts in the Communist body Eminent officials are accused; they are subjected to rigorous enquiries, they confess and submit gratefully to discipline For the edification of the weaker brethren there are now prophets and saints, Marx and Lenin to begin with, whose intelligence and character must no longer be questioned, whose every utterance was divine.

And there is even a mystical communism, affecting the art and literature of Moscow profoundly, whose aim is self-identification with 'the Proletarian'. 'The Proletarian' is a superhuman entity with whom the devout Marxist seeks and attains spiritual communion. The individuality of the worshipper is merged therein.... From our present point of view Communism is only the latest and not the last of the world religions.'

Although he did not mention it, Wells may have had in mind Fascism, which in the Nazi manifestation also had its mystical ideals: of swearing allegiance to the military, of the *Volk* as the counterpart to the Proletariat. Both communism and fascism⁴ worship the state as 'god' and see mere mortals as necessarily subsumed into the greater good of the state. It is not difficult to find precise counterparts in *the religions* of today.

Some basic Godist arguments with Christianity

In recent years the Godist philosophy has posited its own 'objections' to Christianity and especially to the exclusive claims of Christianity. It may be a surprise to some readers

⁴ Communism and fascism also have their sacred 'hymns' — large numbers of patriotic songs, of which the most famous communist example is *The Internationale*. Google 'communism' and 'internationale' for the words.

that these objections emerge generally from within the church itself, which is where *determined Godists*, as opposed to *casual Godists*, are often to be found. As we noted in the Foreword to this book, Hinduism in most of its sub-categories certainly makes room for multiple gods, but Hinduism is not overall Godist in complexion. Islam is certainly not Godist, but can use the multi-faith agenda to promote its political objectives in the West.⁵ Post-modern Judaism, in its ‘liberal’ manifestations, will certainly have some sympathy for the philosophy of Godism. It is sometimes commented that when a ‘multi-faith initiative’ or even a ‘multi-faith service’ is planned, it is usually church-based people who are the instigators and organisers. It would not be possible to list all Godist objections to Christianity because, as we noted elsewhere in this book, Godism is a malleable thing. However there are several key ‘arguments’ deployed, so it is worth considering these in turn:

- Jesus never commented on the ‘other religions’ of His day.
- Jesus never asked anyone to convert or change their religion.
- ‘The Troubles’ in Ulster prove that Christianity is just like the other religions — as regards warfare.
- God is ultimately responsible for His creation and therefore as He allowed sin to enter the world, it is His obligation to provide the remedy: so it was that Jesus (as God) ‘deserved’ to die on the cross.
- It would be unfair of God to ‘damn’ people of *the religions*, who had not had the opportunity to hear the saving good news of Jesus.

⁵ See for examples *Islam and Dhimmitude* by Bat Ye’or, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 2002, ISBN 0-8386-3934-7, especially chapter 10. Also *Faith, Power & Territory* by P Sookhdeo, Isaac Publishing ISBN 0978-0-9547835-8-7.

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- All religions are the same once you take out ‘fundamentalism’ and it is fundamentalism that the primary danger, not the alternative ‘paths’ offered.
- Religions are part of God’s providence for all people.
- All religions contain truth and all contain error.
- Belief in *the religions* (as opposed to *The Way*) leads people closer to God, and so enables them to lead more godly lives, even if they fall short of the beauty of true Christianity.

Before we address these questions from a specifically Christian viewpoint, it is worth reminding ourselves of a few key biblical passages that have a bearing on this. It will be noted, in any case, that if the Godist as a church attendee (as opposed, for example, to *the average man in the street*) has a low view of the Holy Bible — in other words considers Scripture to be tainted and unreliable — then there is little room for agreement or indeed any shifting of positions, because there is no dependable ‘court of appeal’ upon which both Godist and Bible believing Christian may agree. Acting as a *final court* has traditionally been one function of Holy Scripture, enabling the peaceful and authoritative resolution of differences within the church. We appeal to Holy Scripture once more as we try to discern the pathway that God has set apart for those who put their trust in Jesus. So just what is the ‘great salvation’ in which humans are invited to put their faith?

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord,

was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will. (Hebrews 2:1–4)

So there we are reminded that we should be wary of drifting away from the true path. In the previous chapter (at 1:3), it is already stated plainly that Jesus **is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.** Jesus had already spelled out what that salvation is, as he spoke to the crowds that had followed Him:

“Do not work for food that spoils, but [instead] for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him God the Father has placed his seal of approval.”

Then they asked him, **“What must we do to do the works God requires?”**

Jesus answered, **“The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.”**

So they asked him, **“What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do? Our forefathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written: ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’ ”**

Jesus said to them, **“I tell you the truth, it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”**

“Sir,” they said, “from now on give us this bread.”

Then Jesus declared, **“I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty. But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will**

never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:27–40)

These were wonderful promises that Jesus gave to those who would follow Him. The apostle Paul reaffirmed the same point in his letter to the Roman church: **If you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”** (Romans 10:9–11)

And similarly in his letter to the Ephesian church: **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from**

yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:1–9)

The apostle John made a similar point: **He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.** (1 John 2:2)

Paul reaffirmed these basic truths: **For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.** (Colossians 1:13.)

And in the Epistle to the Hebrews we read: **For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.** (Hebrews 9:24–28.)

By now we should be beginning to see the power and consistency of the affirmations of the New Testament writers, confirming what the Lord Jesus had already claimed — that He is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except by Him (see John 14:6). With these thoughts informing us, let us now consider those typical Godist arguments in turn:

‘Jesus never commented on the other religions of His day.’ As the Lord Jesus did not come into this world in order to found a religion but rather to fulfil the Law of God⁶ (and in that sense to delineate the end of ‘religion’) there was no reason for Him to refer to or to comment upon *the religions*. There were many religions in His own day, so the Lord would have had plenty of scope for comment had He chosen to do so. Jesus stayed singularly within the geographical precincts of ancient Israel. The Romans, who actually governed the lands, brought their many ‘gods’ with them. Why on earth should Jesus concern Himself with rather vacuous arguments about *belief systems* when His singular purpose was to fulfil the Law? Jesus’ actions and teachings were already controversial, without the added difficulty of engaging in debate about religions — the figments of men’s minds.

A subsidiary argument is also deployed by the Godist:

‘Jesus never asked anyone to change their religion.’ That surely is to miss the point entirely. In a very real sense Jesus *did* ask people to change their religion, by following God in spirit and in truth, rather than in religious observances. The ‘religious’ leaders of Jesus’ day were in large measure (although it must be stated clearly that there were good and faithful priests and rabbis) leading ordinary people astray. Rather than acting as shepherds and protecting the flock, they were heaping religious burden upon burden onto those unhappy people, who had nowhere else to turn. Jesus was an observant Jew, but He plainly knew that His followers would be expelled from the organised Hebrew religion. He also knew that the Old Covenant was to be extended as a New Covenant and offered to all mankind,⁷ and so He

⁶ This is explored further in chapter 12.

⁷ e.g. Hebrews 8:8–13 and 9:15.

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commanded that the good news of Jesus (of Himself) should be preached to the ends of the earth.⁸

It would hardly be logical to command that the good news of freedom in Christ should be taken everywhere, to the very ends of the earth, if everywhere people were expected to remain within their religions. How then could people find peace if, for example, they were to continue to carry the burdens of their religions? It is disingenuous to claim that the Lord expected people to remain as they were, yoked to religions with all their incessant demands, all their burdens and all their uncertainties. How could the prince of peace give people peace if they were to remain wedded to religions that afford no peace? And we ask again, what on earth is meant by the marriage feast of the lamb, if people were to remain married to their religions?⁹

The incessant demand of the whole Bible is for people to ‘come out and be separate’ — to ‘repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near’. Where Jesus lived there was only Judaism, though there were different factions, and their leaderships combined to persecute Him. The relationship with Jesus that He planned for His followers was one where He would indwell them by the Holy Spirit, so that His disciples would be conscious of Jesus’ power within them.

Jesus never travelled outside of Judea, Samaria and Galilee (except of course when He was taken to safety by Joseph and Mary, in the *flight to Egypt*). His mission was solely to the Jewish people, hence in Matthew 10:5–6 Jesus gave clear instructions that His disciples should seek only the lost sheep of Israel (the covenant people); as their Messiah this was Jesus’ sole mission (Matthew 15:2) for He had come to fulfil the law (their law). (See also Romans

⁸ e.g. Matthew 28:19–20.

⁹ Revelation 19: 7–10

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1:16.) But we know from pre-history that God's plan was that a new covenant would be given to the benefit of all who follow Him, and would be sealed in His blood.¹⁰ It must then be noteworthy that Jesus predicted that the disciples would be thrown out of the synagogues and a time was coming when those who follow *the religions* would kill disciples and think they were doing God's will.¹¹ That was true in apostolic times and remains the experience of Christians today as they encounter religious persecution.¹²

Christians are called to come out and to be separate — the call of the old covenant (to be separate) is extended into the new — which is why a true disciple must leave *the religions* in order to follow Jesus as Lord. It is also noteworthy that in the earliest discourses Paul noted the futility of religion (= circumcision) and the fact that religion places those who follow it straight back under Law.¹³ When Christ-believing (Messianic) Jews and other believers were thrown out of their religions in the first century AD, that enabled them to become the true body of Christ. That was true then — and remains true today. The *body of Christ* is what we call the church. It is argued by this author (once again) that the church is not a religion, it is the body of Christ in this world today and for all time.¹⁴

'Jesus never asked anyone to convert.' No, but he told people to come and follow Him. He invited them to tread a narrow path that leads to life and to leave the broad road that leads to destruction.¹⁵ He still does. It is interesting,

¹⁰ Jeremiah 31:31–34.

¹¹ John 16:2.

¹² See Appendix 6.

¹³ Galatians chapters 4 – 6 allude to this. Especially 4:9; 4:17 and 5:1.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 12:12–30, especially v. 27.

¹⁵ Matthew 7:13–14 and Luke 13:23–24.

then, that those who have been under the yoke of religion usually adopt a Christian name when they follow the Lord Jesus. Having a foot in both camps is simply not an option for a true disciple.

Lastly, it is noteworthy that the body of Christ (the church, the saints, by whatever name they are known) is grafted in to the root stock — the root being Israel. (See all of Romans 11, but especially verses 17, 19, 23 and 24.) God's elect constitute a good tree that cannot bear bad fruit — for this reason *the religions* cannot be in-grafted. The reality is, then, that a true follower of Jesus must convert — not as it happens from one religion to another religion, but to convert from death to life.¹⁶ One of the practical out-workings of that is that they must come out from the yoke of religions as they come into His Kingdom.

Jesus told His followers quite plainly something that would have amazed them: unless their righteousness exceeded that of their religious leaders and *teachers of the law*, they would never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). That was the bad news. But the good news was, and remains today, that Jesus had Himself come to fulfil the Law,¹⁷ since no other human could. Rather than found a religion, Jesus came to change men's hearts, so that they could begin to lead God-honouring lives in this world *and* have assurance of being with Him forever as they remained rooted *in* Him. Jesus instituted those things that would enable men to follow Him and be identified as His disciples — meeting together for prayer, the universal call for repentance, the rite of baptism and the mutual breaking of bread as they remember Him. Jesus was not founding a religion, but these things were to become the hallmarks of

¹⁶ John 5:24 – see also chapter 12 and the section headed *Life's Basic Choice*.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:17.

Christianity — *The Way*.

‘Jesus never asked anyone to leave their religion.’ True, but His earthly ministry was solely to the Hebrew people. Since He came to fulfil their Law — to satisfy it forever — there would be no logical reason to ask Hebrew people to leave it. It is clear that He foreknew that His disciples would in any case be forced out of the synagogue and out of the fellowship that went with it. He did not need to invite what He knew would happen after He returned to heaven. But the critical need to come out and be separate, to follow Jesus single-mindedly and of not hiding our light under the table means that a parting of the ways between a follower of Jesus and *the religions* is quite inevitable, sooner or later. Jesus knew that the New Covenant would be available to all mankind — so, again, continuing within Judaism under the Old Covenant was no longer an option. Indeed, as observant Messianic Jews of the first century battled with this whole issue of continuing within Judaism, they found that it was impossible to remain within the synagogue without coming back under the ‘Law’. And so the parting of the ways between Jesus’ disciples and the Jewish religious hierarchy became permanent.

As it is the Godists who have raised this issue we must thank them for encouraging clarity in this: we focused earlier on a nineteenth century Hindu lady who yielded her life to the Lord Jesus. What did she have to say on this matter?

‘I shall not attempt to describe how and what I felt at the time when I made an unconditional surrender, and knew I was accepted to be a branch of the True Vine, a child of God by adoption in Christ Jesus my Saviour How very different the truth of God was from the false idea that I had entertained from my earliest childhood. That was that I must

merit to earn present or future happiness, the pleasure of Svarga, or face the utterly inconceivable loss of Moksha or liberation. This I could never hope for, as a woman has no hope of Moksha

'How good, how indescribably good! What good news for me a woman, a woman born in India, among Brahmans who hold out no hope for me and the like of me! The Bible declares that Christ did not reserve this great salvation for a particular caste or sex No caste, no sex, no work, and no man was to be depended upon to get salvation, this everlasting life, but God gave it freely to any one and every one who believed on His Son Whom He sent to be the 'propitiation for our sins'.

'I had to give up all pride of ancestral religion being old and superior, which is preventing many of my country-people from finding Christ although they know they have not got the joy of salvation. They can never have it except in Christ Do not therefore lose time through pride or because of any other difficulty. The caste may put you out, your near and dear ones perhaps reject and persecute you, you may very likely lose your temporal greatness and riches; but never mind. The great salvation which you will get in Christ by believing on Him and confessing Him before men, is worth all the great sacrifices you can possibly make. Yes and more than that, for all the riches and all the gain, and all the joys of the world, do not begin to compare with the JOY OF SALVATION.

'I would urge you, dear brother or sister, to make haste and get reconciled with God through Christ. For the great day of judgement is fast coming on us, so make haste and flee from the wrath of God, which you and I have justly merited. God is love, and He is waiting patiently for you to accept His great salvation. So despise not 'the riches

of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering', and know 'that goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance' (Romans 2:4).

'The "Troubles" in Ulster prove that Christianity is just like the other religions.'

This is a singularly British issue, but similar comments might be made of the tensions and animosities that have sadly afflicted (for example) the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox traditions. Presumably as people make this comment they also have in mind that *if God cannot keep 'His own' in order then what is the point of following Him?* Since at least some of this reasoning (or lack of!) is rather disingenuous, one suspects that the objection is offered up as a neat excuse rather than as a genuine stumbling block to seriously considering the claims of Jesus. Nevertheless, as it is a widespread objection in the UK we will answer it in relation to the Ulster problems. But the answer we proffer is likely to be of relevance where similar animosities have been found in the past. So, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) is sometimes offered as an example of 'Christian extremists' who, it is claimed, are on a par with (for example) Muslim jihadists. But they are not and cannot be: the Ulster 'troubles' owed a lot to 'right versus left' politics, with the Protestants being broadly right and the Catholics broadly left. The IRA owed much of its political theory to communism and it is not surprising it lost a great deal of political and military support with the final demise of communism in Europe. That seems to have been one of the reasons why the IRA/Republican leadership became more interested in 'peace' in the late 1990s. Also, of course, there was a reduction in financial support due to the reduction in US (Catholic) support after the 9/11 terrorist

attack in New York. As far as the author knows, no one has ever claimed in Eire or Ulster that they were doing God's will in the terrorist 'Troubles'. The fact that the Roman Catholic church was muted in its condemnation of the IRA and widely perceived to have failed to condemn IRA violence may require a commentary from Roman Catholics rather than this author, but could reflect the readiness with which Catholicism historically appears to perceive itself as a political as well as a spiritual instrument.

A true Christian will be recognised by their gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4–11 and 28) and by the fruit in their lives (Galatians 5:22–6). Since this fruit was singularly lacking in the main armed factions, it is fair to conclude that they did not comprise true Christians (i.e. people who were born again). What are called 'Christian' belligerences, if they exist at all, are in direct contradiction of the clear teaching of Jesus. Violence, by contrast, under Islam, is specifically legislated for in the Koran. It is for Godists to explain why their 'god' so completely changed His mind on peace and war as between Christianity and Islam.

The final nail in the coffin of this idea of IRA having been 'Christian militants' comes from the former *Red Army Faction* terrorist Astrid Proll, a German terrorist of the 1970s (active, coincidentally, at the height of the Ulster Troubles). The Red Army Faction was linked to the Baader Meinhof gang in Germany. Trained by Fatah (Palestinian organisation) in use of guns and terrorist techniques, they caused much bloodshed and heartache in West Germany, as it then was. She was interviewed by the Times Newspaper in its 12 November 2008 edition. Remembering as we have said, that communism bears the hallmarks of man-made religion, Proll's comments on the IRA, spoken as an expert in the field of left wing militancy, are instructive. She fled

to England after release by the German authorities and said that she met many left wing people in the UK, but that they were not so hysterical and morally rigorous as the ones she knew in Germany. And this most pertinent comment of all — *there was no space for an armed left-wing group in the UK, because the IRA already held that role.* The IRA were not religious terrorists. They were left wing terrorists. No doubt some will continue to cite the IRA as being a ‘Christian’ terrorist group. A few no doubt in sheer ignorance, others in a disingenuous way.

‘God is ultimately responsible for His creation and therefore as He allowed sin to enter the world, so he must provide the remedy: so it was that Jesus (as God) ‘deserved’ to die on the cross’ We review that claim exhaustively in chapter 13.

‘It would be unfair of God to ‘damn’ people of the religions, who had not had the opportunity to hear the saving good news of Jesus.’ We will leave this question for the time being as it is dealt with exhaustively in chapter 13.

‘All religions are the same once you take out ‘fundamentalism’ and it is fundamentalism that the primary danger, not the alternative ‘paths’ offered. Religions are part of God’s providence for all people’ If readers have been following this book systematically, it should by now be abundantly clear that whatever *the religions* are, they are not the same! This book is not a comparison of religions, but even the most cursory and casual glance reveals phenomenal differences and contradictions between *the religions*. Even if they could all be wrong, they could not all be right! Godists may claim *the religions* are the same but they delude only

themselves. We revert to the question about the nature of a ‘god’ who decides to reveal ‘himself’ or ‘itself’ in markedly different ways, indifferent to the potential for harm and conflict that this entails.

‘All religions contain truth and all contain error.’

The background in which all religions operate is that of the created order, in which the one true God has given man the basic insight that He (the Creator God) exists, and in which man knows right from wrong, good from evil. (See Romans 1.) So it need not surprise us if we find traces of that basic human awareness cropping up here and there in human life and culture. These basic insights are the reason why man is *without excuse* for sin. But *truth*, as we have seen, is not merely a set of propositions, it is a person, for the Lord Jesus stated plainly that He *is* the truth: **“I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (John 14:6). The Lord’s statement requires no elaboration. You either accept it or you reject it. A middle course is not possible — although many continue to try to ‘find’ one, as for example in Godism. Whilst individual Christians and even some churches may fall into error, the Lord will guide us into all truth; and God’s Word, the Bible, remains the standard by which truth claims are to be tested.

‘Belief in the religions (as opposed to The Way) leads people closer to God, and so enables them to lead more godly lives, even if they fall short of the beauty of true Christianity.’ If belief in *the religions* enabled people to lead better lives, then most would consider that to be at least a benign side-effect. However the various religions do seem to entail belief systems and practical outworkings that are

often injurious to their followers, or to those who refuse to follow. The Christian's focus should be on *salvation*. We are not called to live 'slightly better lives'. We are actually called to be holy (1 Peter 1:15). It is the Lord Jesus who is able to present us to God as 'without fault' (or holy) as we read in Jude 24. In order to avoid God's righteous and just judgement we must either fulfil the Law or be saved from the Law. Religions may have the (unintended?) consequence of deluding their followers into the idea that they are earning their 'salvation' when in fact they remain entrapped by sin, and without anyone to plead on their behalf. Instead of focusing on religious beliefs and their various burdens, Jesus comments in Matthew 11:30 quite simply that His burden is 'light'. And His 'yoke' is easy — giving us the impression of a well-fitting harness, one that does not chafe or hurt us. For those of us who are wearied by the burdens of *the religions*, we do well to heed Jesus' words rather than try to harness ourselves to those religions:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Remember, salvation ultimately is a gift, as we see in Titus 3:5 — **“. . . he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit.”** The New Testament makes it clear that the gift of salvation is received through faith. **By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God.** (Ephesians 2:8)

The Religions, it must be remembered, may lead people to live worse lives! The Bible's contention is quite clear: it

is only through Jesus that people might be saved. We nailed Him to the cross by our sins, as the apostle Peter stated before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:10, as Peter was forced to explain the miraculous healing of a crippled beggar) but in a very real sense he addresses us as well: **“ . . . then know this It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. [Jesus] . . . is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone’. Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”**

Case proven?

It is hoped that readers will begin to see that there are sound arguments that address the basic Godist objections to Christianity. There comes a point at which we have to ask just how much we are entitled to expect in terms of ‘answers’ to our specific questions of God. He has been plain enough in all that He has said. There is a limit, surely, to what we can expect in terms of our somewhat insubstantial questions about the way in which God has chosen to offer us the gift of salvation. When we incessantly find objections and difficulties, are we like lumps of clay trying to have an argument with the potter? **You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “He did not make me”? Can the pot say of the potter, “He knows nothing?”** (Isaiah 29:16)

The church welcomes honest questioning and honest doubts. But there must come a point at which people will have to make a decision about the evidence given. We think again of our *Oligarch’s Game* described in the Foreword to

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this book, although we recognise that the analogy has its limitations. Ultimately, people need to make a decision if they are to be enriched immeasurably by the love of God and know for themselves the saving power of Jesus. To fail to make any decision is ultimately a ‘vote against’ Jesus. When so great a salvation has been revealed it must be the ultimate insult to God to reject it — to throw back in His face a gift that He has gone to such extraordinary and costly lengths to provide.

Some readers may object that the answers provided still do not satisfy them personally: if so, then that is their ultimate choice. God does not force Himself on anyone. Jesus does not barge in, and He graciously gives us time and opportunity to respond with repentance and faith in Him. But time for decision must inevitably one day run out, and that is why we suggest that to fail to make any decision as regards Christ is the same as casting a vote against Him. How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (See Hebrews 2:3) This salvation has been confirmed to us by those who actually saw Jesus, and at the end we are bound either to accept or reject their testimony.

The world generally casts its vote against Jesus (at least in the sphere of *the religions* and in the popular media and amongst Western intelligentsia), rejecting His claim on their lives and effectively declining the offer of forgiveness, salvation, eternal life. Some readers may be shocked and consider this is just too harsh a conclusion, but we repeat: God has graciously allowed us time to decide which side we are on, and no-one knows when they will die and have to face judgement. Others may object: surely to be neutral as regards this great salvation cannot be construed as a rejection? Jesus was emphatic that it could: **“he who is not with me is against me”** he said (in Luke 11:23).

Knowledgeable readers will immediately pick up the apparent contrast with Luke 9:50. Let us close this debate with a few words to see how Jesus' two statements do *not* conflict. To understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' words, we need to know the context. What did Jesus say, to whom did He say it and why? There are four occurrences which look relevant. In Matthew 12:30 and Luke 11:23, Jesus says: **"He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters."** But, in Mark 9:40 and Luke 9:50, He makes two statements that seem to say the reverse. In Mark 9:40, Jesus said: **"For he who is not against us is for us."** And in Luke 9:50, He says: **"He who is not against you is for you."** We encounter the first occurrence of our negative statement (not with me is against me) in Matthew 12, which taken in context spans verses 22 to 32: **Then they brought him a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, and Jesus healed him, so that he could both talk and see. All the people were astonished and said, "Could this be the Son of David?"**

But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, **"It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons."**

Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, **"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand. If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then can his kingdom stand? And if I drive out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your people drive them out? So then, they will be your judges. But if I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.**

"Or again, how can anyone enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first ties up the

strong man? Then he can rob his house.

“He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters. And so I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

This account is repeated in Luke 11:14–28. It is interesting to note that the two negative accounts were given to the Pharisees when they accused Jesus of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebul. The account in Matthew leads into a warning about the unforgivable sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. The negative account in Luke leads into a discourse about an unclean spirit leaving a man only to return later with seven spirits far worse than itself. We can see that in these two negative occurrences, Jesus is speaking out against the Pharisees. Let us take a look at the same basic phrase in its positive context (he who is not against us is with us). In Mark 9:38–41 we read: **“Teacher,” said John, “we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us.”**

“Do not stop him,” Jesus said. “No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.” The same episode is recorded in Luke 9:49–50. We see that the positive occurrence was communicated to the disciples, as they questioned the authority of other people casting out demons in Jesus’ name.

THE EMPTY PROMISE OF GODISM

This phrase is the same one that, when reversed and spoken in context to the other group of people (the Pharisees), meant something entirely different. Jesus' words signified: these men whom you would like to turn away actually believe although they lack knowledge. The Pharisees, though they have full knowledge of the sacred writings, still profane that which they know to be truth. To put this another way, the men who are *for* Jesus (though they may seem, at first glance, to be rather far away), walk faithfully in the light they have available. The Pharisees, who present themselves as devout and dedicated to God, are actually far from Him, perverting the light that they do have. To the hard-hearted and unbelieving Pharisees, Jesus spoke words they needed to hear: 'You are not with Me.' Conversely, to the disciples, He spoke the words they also needed to hear. In effect: 'Do not judge people who work in my name; they are with us.' The Pharisees did not believe in Jesus; the disciples did believe but were limiting His power.

Some church-attending Godists might say that, irrespective of their unbelief in all that the Bible has to say, and their belief in multiple religions, they too are acting in Jesus' name. However, there must be a huge danger that, like the Pharisees, they too are deeply hard-hearted and stiff-knecked. With the clear knowledge of Jesus Who has declared Himself to be the way, the truth and the life (not *a* way, *a* truth and *a* life), and supposedly a knowledge of the gospel of Christ, they persist in saying that God has revealed Himself in multiple and contradictory ways. How sad! And they are determined to keep others subject to the burdens of *the religions*. How selfish!